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## Hard Feelings

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## Hard Feelings

Will leaned over his log book in the thin milky light of the fluorescent beam. It was five-thirty in the morning, not quite day, and Caroline sat braiding her hair in the center of the sagging bed. She wore faded blue longjohns and there was an oily stain on one knee. They had been arguing and now there was a lull in the argument. The radio was tuned to the flight weather: winds and ceilings and visibility.

"She's acting like . . . like a chippy," Will said. He didn't look at Caroline when he said this. He scratched something in the log book with a mechanical pencil.

"She's your *daughter*," Caroline said.

One of the departing guests came out on the porch one cabin over. He sang, "Zip-a-de-do-dah." Caroline pictured him: the portly margarine executive from San Jose. He hadn't liked her using real butter.

"You packed the flight breakfast?"

"It's in the plane."

"Use the rest of that coho for dinner, 'ey?"

He'd almost eradicated his elegant tidewater Virginia drawl.

"I think I know what to do for dinner, Will."

"You must speak to her, Caroline, or we'll board her down in the village for the rest of the summer. She's a distraction to the guests."

"If she summers down there, so do I."

"We need you here. What would I do without you?"

"Hire someone."

"Caroline."

"I don't want her down there. The kids're up to no good. The keggers go on all night. Did you know they stole a skiff two weeks ago? They went across to the old village in bad weather."

Will shut his log book and, with military precision, placed his pencil in his chest pocket. He clicked the flashlight and they were in the dawn shadows, softer light, returning Will's face to the way Caroline preferred to see him, still handsome, his hair over his forehead drifting a little silver, the intensity of his nettled eyes hidden by the dark.

"Dear," he said. He sat close to her on the bed, conspiratorially. "Speak with her. We're in business here. Can you do this for me?"

"I'll see," Caroline said. It was the best she could do. The word *chippy* still reverberated in the room, like circles in an eddy around a sassy fish jumping.

Caroline walked down through the princess pine and swordfern to the river and beyond to the spit. The sun was out and this was the time of afternoon when the sun struck the river. The sun was not out often. She fished through the big pockets of her apron and found her Raybans. Through the sunglasses the cedar trees seemed dark and monstrous, the

glaze on the riffles like a photographic negative. This was a time of day she considered hers exclusively. She'd cleaned up after lunch, assembled and measured the ingredients for the bouillabaisse, and baked three loaves of Irish soda bread. The last guests had flown out at dawn. Will was due back soon, from Vancouver, with two new guests who'd started their day at O'Hare in Chicago. The spit ran parallel to the bank with a tongue of shallow warm water lapping in between. Granite stones studded the bank. Two flat-bottomed river boats—*Tupelo Honey* and *Chinacat Sunflower*—were moored to a stunted cottonwood. Caroline tried to remember the last time she listened to Van Morrison. She pictured a moist summer dusk at a commune near Hagerstown, the women whipping a flowered bedsheet for a tablecloth over a door-and-sawhorse table in the sloping yard, the men smoking together near the woodpile. She and Will had been on their way to Canada, to a new life on the edge of the wilderness. It was just a dream that had spread like gossip among people their age then. Birch hadn't been weaned. They'd had a microbus loaded down with all their belongings and a cashier's check for five thousand dollars, all the fortune in the world.

Caroline sat down in one of the low canvas camp chairs, which were frayed and bleached with the weather. Someone had left a *New Yorker* face down on the beach next to a grizzly track. The track was about eight inches longer than the magazine. It was old. The claw depressions, little moon sickles, were still sharp, but the edges around the heel were crumbling. She peeled away her apron and rolled her culottes high to take advantage of the sun. Her legs were pale and though it was July she still had what Will called her winter coat, fine strawberry blond hair which grew in an almost invisible layer from her knees down.

Birch was upriver a few hundred yards, sunning her fourteen-year-old body on a flat black boulder. She didn't have her top on. Caroline took off her Raybans to be sure. Birch sat cross-legged and stroked sunscreen on her shoulders and arms. Her breasts were really *there* this year. Her hair was Caroline's hair: kinky and floating, not quite red. They were both glad of that. The green river pooled behind her boulder and beyond that there was a stretch of whitewater and above that, dense hemlock and spruce which cut the view. She could only see the very highest section of dirty blue glacial ice on one mountain.

Caroline stood up and yelled. "Get dressed. Your Dad'll be here soon."

Birch didn't respond, so she yelled louder. She didn't like yelling, but the river noise was always there, its crash and caterwaul buffering bird and animal sounds, human voices. The only louder noises were motors, the outboards, the plane, the pandemonium of the generator late at night.

Caroline heard the plane long before she saw it, the swooping drone of the engine as Will sparred with the mountains' eccentric air currents. Birch stood up on the boulder and tipped her breasts back into the bathing suit top. Caroline drooped back into the chair and imagined what they were seeing from the air: the green slash of the valley, female, fertile,



against the bold snowy coast range mountains. Her argument with Will slinked around in her thoughts like a scolded dog at dinner time.

The plane pounced above the flatwater a few hundred yards downstream before splashing down, each pontoon spraying a sunny fan of water over the wings. Will would never land so sloppily. Caroline gathered her apron and the magazine and walked down the spit and through the cottonwoods to the trail.

"A ride to write home about," the first man said. He was the older one, the father, and he wore a fishing vest with blond-colored flies perched on the flypatch. He was ready. His aluminum rod cases clanked as he alighted from the plane. "Hello, hello," he said to Caroline, pumping her hand. "I'm Joe. Joe Regalo." He wore a crusty wedding band which pressed into her palm. "This is my son Steve. He's hurt himself already."

Caroline saw the new wood of the crutches through the plane window as Steve struggled with them. He was laughing with Trevor.

"What happened?" Caroline said. Trevor had been piloting the plane. He'd worked for them the summer before.

"It's nothing," Steve said. "A sprain. I twisted it jogging." He situated the rubber tips of the crutches on a boulder and boosted himself out of the plane.

"No more o' your salty jokes now," Trevor said. "Missus, your good man had to stay in Vancouver." He squatted in the plane and handed Caroline a liter of rye and a black mesh bag of clean towels. "The provincial office—the licensing office—they wanted him to sign some papers an' the papers weren't ready. He asked me to bring these gentlemen up here and fish with them. A nasty job, for sure," he laughed, "but someone has to do it."

"Welcome, Trevor," Caroline said. "Joe. Steve. Welcome to Silverthorne." She nestled the rye and towels in among the boulders.

"This is Caroline," Trevor said, shoving their tweedy Geoffrey Beane luggage toward her. "She's the best cook west of the Fraser River." He winked at her and when he did the wrinkles around his eye made her think of a child's pinwheel. "Steve here—from the sound of it—is the best cook in Chicago."

"That's quite a claim to fame," Caroline said, settling the wide strap of the carry-on over her shoulder.

"This is a paradise," Joe said. He surveyed the camp, the river, his beefy hands on his wide hips, as though he owned the place, and indeed he does, Caroline thought, he's bought us for the week.

"Help, Mom?"

All eyes turned to Birch on the bank. She wore high-topped Converse sneakers and a long T-shirt over her bathing suit. The T-shirt was printed with the words: *The Four Stages of Tequila: you're good-looking, you're rich, you're bullet-proof, you're invisible.*

"Yes, of course," Caroline said. "Pick up some of these bags and take them to the guest cabin. To the porch."

Trevor sat back on his haunches and took off his baseball cap and wiped the top of his bald head. "Growing like a weed, ain't she, missus?"

"That's the way with children, Trevor."

"She's a beauty," Joe said, after Birch was out of earshot.

"Like mother, like daughter," Trevor said. He hung two pair of hipwaders over the wing trusses.

Steve hobbled further down the riverbank and gestured with one crutch to an ouzel. His wrapped ankle worried Caroline a little. His father had laid his rod cases against a log, hitched up his khakis, and followed him, with the self-consciousness city people have their first days in the bush.

Trevor handed her a small cooler which she knew contained her fresh vegetables, and just as the weight of the cooler shifted from his hands to her arms, he said, "Will said to tell you 'no hard feelings,' dearie."

"Look," Steve shouted. "Bald eagles."

"This one's more of a birder than an angler," Trevor said. "Wait'll you show him the heron."

"Is the dearie from him or you?" Caroline said, smiling, and she turned, loaded down, and followed Birch to the cabins.

Trevor had brought the Sunday *Vancouver Sun* and a *Rolling Stone*. Birch lay on her stomach on the braided rug in the main cabin, plundering the fashion ads in the newspaper. The dining table was set, candles lit. The generator battled with their peace of mind and Joe and Steve sipped rye on the red leather sofa. Trevor and Caroline scuttled about the kitchen, which was separated from the dining area by a long island. The island served as cutting board, bar, lunch counter, bookcase. Caroline's cookbooks were stacked helter-skelter, clippings and notecards straggling in among the pages. Three brass lamps hung along the kitchen wall, their shine waxing and waning with the generator's clatter. It was eight o'clock and still light outside.

"Did Will say when we might expect him back?" Caroline said. She was cutting dark pink chunks of smoked salmon.

Trevor tore open a packet of stoned wheat crackers and dumped them into a bread basket. "He said he'd try to catch a ride up day after tomorry. With the Dean River crew."

"Where's he staying?"

"With his sister in Kitsilano."

"You go on out and have a drink with them, Trevor. I'll finish up in here."

She watched them from the kitchen, she listened. Steve was brushing dust from the inside of his camera. Joe was the hearty one, a back slapper, a salesman. He owned an antique shop and Steve had a bakery above the antique shop. They'd lived in Chicago all their lives, on the thirtieth and forty-fourth floors of the same high-rise. They'd been on the Bow in Alberta last year. "Next year New Zealand," Joe said, raising his drink in toast. "The Tongariro." "Be here now," Steve said. Caroline couldn't believe he said that. "I just like to get my ducks in a row," Joe said.



They were an odd pair, Joe, the cagey collector of Chippendale frames and trestle tables, Steve, the young Dead Head who'd turned his health habits into a business. He talked about whole grains and fiber and Jerry Garcia. He put Caroline in mind of a satyr, with his round bottom and short legs, his corona of curly blond hair.

"How's the ankle, lad?" Trevor said.

"I'm not feeling any pain. After this."

"Do you think this'd look good on me?" Birch asked.

Trevor leaned over her newspaper and said, "You'd look fine in anything, Birch. Say, why don't you come fishing with us tomorrow? Like you used to do, you know."

Birch curled upright in one fluid motion, drawing in her dignity, her arms around her calves. "I don't go out anymore, Trevor."

She had on pale jeans, torn in white shreds at the knees and across one thigh. There was something about her fleshy brown knees that made Caroline think of breasts exposed and she supposed that was the idea, to expose herself, in some acceptable manner.

"Don't you get lonely for kids your own age?" Steve said.

"My parents prefer to have me here," Birch said.

"That doesn't answer my question, silly goose. You play backgammon?"

"Sometimes," Birch said.

"Poker's my game tonight," Joe said. "You'll make a fourth, won't you, Caroline?"

"What're we betting? Pasta?"

"Pennies, just pennies," Trevor said.

Birch came over to her mother, behind the island, and slipped the shoulder of her T-shirt down and said, "Am I tanning or burning?"

Caroline cut her eyes across to the men, slicing into them, to see what they were seeing. Only Steve had paid attention to Birch's question.

"Trevor tells me," Joe said, "you've had a bit of a bear problem this year, Caroline."

She put her arms around Birch and kissed her cheek, the way she might have when she was little. They were the same size now. "We haven't seen her in a few weeks, actually."

"This far north they're afraid of us," Trevor said.

"My father has a bear gun," Birch said. "I've never been afraid of bears." She pushed away from Caroline. "I'm famished. Really famished. When do we eat?"

The winey smell of the olive oil, the garlic, swelled Caroline's appetite, too. "Help me, sweetie," she said to Birch. And she kept her there behind the island, among the ovens and clay bowls, safe in an old ritual.

"Two sunny days in a row. Can we stand it?"

"Someone's asleep at the wheel," Caroline said.

"I read that sunshine makes you, uh, horny," Birch said.

"I don't think we have to worry," Caroline said, "up here in the rain forest."

Birch arranged a sleeping bag, unzipped and inside up, on her flat sunning boulder, as though she were the hostess. Caroline set her water-logged Keds side by side and slipped out of her flannel shirt. She wore her old two-piece: a worn bikini, once-white, now yellowing, without much stretch left. Birch's snappy suit was printed with flamingos and watermelon slices. She could have been a model. Her skin had a luminous quality to it.

Caroline tried to remember if her own skin had ever looked like that. When she was fourteen, sun-bathing was not something girls did. Caroline had grown up in Baltimore, in a flat over a bridal shop on Eastern Avenue. Her most prized activity had been riding the city bus up York Road to The Senator and basking in its dark art deco splendor to see Kim Novak, Elizabeth Taylor, Natalie Wood. Afterward, she'd read her yellowing copies of *Photoplay*. She'd counted herself lucky if her skin had broken out only on her forehead where she could hide it with her bangs. Hiding had been a way of life: acne, tampons, your period, hickeys, other girls' secrets, phone calls, your feelings.

"What's he doing down there?" Birch said. She meant Steve.

"Splashing around in the Kikkboat. I think the cold water's good for his ankle."

Trevor and Joe had left early in the morning, after a breakfast of Finnish bread and fruit. They'd taken *Tupelo Honey*, all the gear the boat would hold, a lunch, and two six-packs of Moosehead. Caroline didn't expect them back until nearly dark. They'd filled an extra can of gas for the outboard and gone upriver. She was counting on a fresh catch for dinner.

"Do you think he's cute?"

"Who?"

Birch wiggled her shoulders against the sleeping bag. "You know. Steve."

"He's way too old for you, kiddo." Caroline slapped away a black fly. "I *know* that. I'm just asking."

"I guess so. Let me have some of that sun-sceen."

"Sun-screen attracts bears," Steve said. "Did you know that?" He was standing on one crutch at the edge of the woods, among the thimbleberries. With one hand he picked the dusky berries and popped them into his mouth. His Patagonia shorts were the lavender of sunsets, a phenomena Caroline missed—in the mountains you never get the bright sunsets. "They're especially fond of good-looking women, dipped in sunscreen, french-fried."

Birch giggled.

"We stand forewarned," Caroline said. "How'd you like the Kikkboat?"

"It was more fun than reading ten-year-old *National Geographics*. But I'm getting bored. I'm not healing fast enough."

"It's a shame," Caroline said. She tried to ignore the fillip of arousal she felt lying before him.

"D'you ever make croissants?"

"I don't believe I ever have."



"Would you like to? I feel like baking something."

Caroline came up on her elbows and smiled at him and put on her sunglasses. "What a fine idea. Will loves them. He'll be back tomorrow."

"Those are mergansers," Steve said, pointing to the ducks splattering in an eddy. "Not the prettiest duck in the world."

"Have you ever seen a harlequin?" Birch said, excited.

"Those're beautiful, aren't they?" Steve said. "And wood ducks. Ducks are pretty amazing."

Birch flopped over on her stomach to face him. "I love birds. For their colors alone. There's so much variety."

Caroline thought, since when?

Steve stumped into the dining room, his Walkman dangling from one hand, music dribbling from the headphones. He sat on a stool at the counter across from Caroline. She was creaming butter for the chocolate prune cake. It was late afternoon and Birch was showering in the bathhouse next to the kitchen. Caroline had started a good fire in the Monarch to bake the cake and that meant the hot water jacket which fed the shower was blistering. All systems are go, Caroline thought. Food, fire, showers. It had taken them a long time—years—to make Silverthorne function smoothly.

"Listen to this," Steve said. He held one headphone to her ear, reaching across the counter. His T-shirt was dark under the arms with sweat and Caroline had the unnerving urge to smell him there, the way a kitten might burrow in an underarm.

"Alberta Hunter," Caroline said.

"I'll be *down* to get you in a taxi, honey." Steve sang along.

"Please be ready 'bout half past eight," Caroline answered.

He turned up the volume on the Walkman, but all they could hear was a staticky bass.

"We need a Walkman built for Siamese twins," he said, snapping his fingers.

She creamed the butter with gusto. "I want to be there when the band starts playing."

"I saw her in person," Steve said. "Last year. What a woman."

"You have a nice life, don't you? The best of both worlds."

"I can't complain. I kid you not—I can't complain."

"You ever hear of the Fabulous Thunderbirds?" Birch said. She stood outside the screen door, a dewy newborn adolescent swaddled in Caroline's long pink terrycloth robe.

"Stop, stop," Caroline said, clutching her midriff. "I'm media-starved."

Steve said, "You should come to Chicago for a little R and R." The hoopla of his smile seemed like confetti in the kitchen.

After their fine dinner of fish steaks and baked potatoes and stuffed artichoke hearts, after the story of the day's outing—the stately moose spied working his way up a tender green draw of alder, the catch, the



party on horseback setting up camp just a few kilometers upstream—after the dishes and the sweeping, after the generator was turned off and the low lamps lit, after Birch settled herself at the table to write her best friend Cheryl, inviting her up to the camp for a week, after Trevor and Joe opened the backgammon board, Caroline and Steve wandered out to the porch steps and sat down with their brandies. The moon was still behind the mountain and its indirect light was woolly across the clouds moving in. The river swooshed along and Steve strained to recognize the siffle of some birds near the porch. Sea weather seemed to be insinuating its way up the fjord, up the valley.

They were dressed warmly, Caroline in her culottes and a heavy wool sweater, Steve in a pale blue pile jacket. He fairly glowed in the night, resting his back against the rough-hewn porch pillar, his drink between his knees. She thought of auras. She thought of drubbing his curly hair with her knuckles and she wondered at its springiness, like a brand new carpet. She was afraid her thoughts were visible, a tattoo on her forehead.

He was talking about his mother, who was visiting a weight-loss spa in Colorado. She did it every year and every year she lost the same ten pounds. He groaned. His groan had a laugh inside it, at its core, like the center of a hard candy or a french kiss.

"Catch-and-release," Trevor said, inside the cabin. "That's the best approach with fish *and* women."

"Women can think that way, too," Birch warned him.

"You come fishing with us and show us," Joe said.

"I just might. I just might."

The night was lush around them, moist with the weather change, the trees bending like caftan-dressed nymphs, small creatures rustling in among the bracken fern, the huckleberries.

"You and I, Caroline—"

Whatever was he going to say? How could he possibly see through her, into her, already? *Caroline. Caroline.* She'd forgotten how it felt to hear her name from the mouth of a new man.

"We're people who always want to sit in the middle. Greedy."

"Doesn't everyone want attention?"

"No. *No, no, no.* Dad, for example—let's take an example at hand—he was furious when we threw a surprise party for his birthday. We had those black balloons. A three-tier carrot cake. He hated it."

"Come to think of it, Will's that way, too."

"The same people work too hard. They work at play. At everything."

"Serious."

"I saw you in the kitchen—humming, shuffling to your own hums. Soliciting attention from that old goat Trevor."

"That's the way Trevor and I *are*."

"Playful. I like that."

Birch came to the screen door, her fuzz of full hair wiry in the lamplight behind her. She seemed tall and imposing.

"Steve," she said. "Are you going out tomorrow?"

"I think I might," he said.

"Me, too."

Caroline's legs firmed over with goosebumps. A wind blew up the river. The moon was rising, like a sliced turnip over Mt. Nusatsum. "I'll keep the home fires burning," she said.

The next morning there was a drizzle, fine north coast mist. The cloud ceiling looked as though you could reach up and touch its baffles. Steve's ankle was swollen again and painful. He decided to remain in camp and after his third cup of coffee, he returned to his cabin. Birch went out with Trevor and Joe. Caroline lingered in the kitchen, leafing through her cookbooks, which was one of her escapes, a path to daydreaming she could justify. She looked up the recipe for croissants and saw that the weather was not right. She did not think that the Dean River crew would be able to fly in today. She drank jasmine tea and tried not to think about how glad she was that Will would not be able to fly in. She tried not to think about anything. She felt at the mercy of her feelings. Shame and desire vied for power in her heart, a two-headed female beast she'd known since she was twelve.

She heated a pan of water and went out to the back porch. The floor slanted and broken rods and old orange kapok lifejackets were strewn across one end of the porch. Beyond, the gentle rain saturated the bush, the woods. There was a silvery light over the fir duff in the yard. Nearby, birds made tiny squeaks in their nest.

She shaved her legs with Will's razor, in long silky strokes through lime-scented shaving cream. Then she braided her hair at the crazed mirror hanging beside the back door. She'd bathed the night before and shaving her legs had been an afterthought. She pinched her cheeks, settled a sou'wester on her head, pulled on black rubber farm boots and a slicker. The clean towels in a plastic grocery bag were her excuse.

"I thought you'd never come," Steve said. He had a fire going in the little airtight stove.

"Here're your clean towels." She laid the bag on the armchair.

"Have you ever seen sandhill cranes around here?" He was lying on the bed—in khakis and a longjohn shirt—looking at a red field guide. There was one lamp lit, its globe all sooty.

"What do they look like?"

"Look here," he said, and he rolled over on his side and flattened the field guide open on the edge of the bed.

Caroline sat down beside him and resisted the temptation to reach out and touch him. His temple was damp and pink. She flung her sou'wester on the floor.

"They're the ones with the red caps."

She leaned over the book. His field glasses were lying on the nightstand, and a pocketwatch, and a pipe and a pouch of Captain Black tobacco,



and a book of matches from Thai Town on North Clark. She hadn't known that he smoked. She realized there were many things about him she didn't know.

He kissed her. "Mm," he said, "Car-o-line."

"Oh, my," Caroline said.

They let themselves look at last into one another's eyes. They kissed again, his fingers on her jaw. After that, her slicker and boots disappeared and he put another log on the fire. They lay on the bed for a long time, talking, talking, in one another's arms, their attraction like a membrane between them. When at last he undressed her, he said, "How do you keep your skin so soft?" And she said, "Bear grease." They made love with the rain sealing them away in the cabin. He was a noisy lover. Once she said, "How old're you, anyway?" He said, "Twenty-four," and she thought, fresh off the assembly line. She felt new under his hands. He had a way of kissing which made her think of spelunking.

She left him sitting on the edge of the bed, tamping Captain Black into the bowl of his pipe. His penis reminded her of lilacs in the rain, tumescent but limp. She had to pee and she put on her T-shirt and ran into the rain, barefooted, into the pistachio light of the downpour. They had a rule that everyone had to use the outhouse, but she'd broken so many rules already today. She squatted beside the cabin next to a rusty outboard propeller. The rain soaked through her shirt and she turned her face up to the rain and laughed out loud.

"Caroline. What—are—you—doing?" Birch said, her fists balled at her side, stiff-armed. She stood about ten meters from Caroline in her Converse sneakers and a long black slicker, her hair dripping and dark and wet against her head.

Caroline said, "There's a bear behind you. Come here." She stood up, the rusty propeller in one hand, and opened one arm to Birch.

"It's just a stupid black bear," Birch said, stalking over to the porch steps near Caroline. "He's been following me." She allowed Caroline to hug her, to push her toward the porch steps. "He didn't even have the good sense to get out of the brush. I was on the trail."

The bear lumbered around the edge of the woods, like a drunken pup. His coat was dirty and streaked with mud, his dumb eyes struggled to see.

Steve came to the door in his lavender shorts. "What's all the commotion?"

Birch looked him up and down, coolly assessing him. "It's just a black bear."

Caroline heaved the propeller toward the bear. "Get out. Get out of here." She was quite aware that her T-shirt just barely covered her bottom.

"Vamoose," Steve yelled.

"Andale, andale," Birch sang out. She giggled.

The three of them curled their toes over the edge of the porch and yelled at the bear. The bear kinked his neck up once as if to complain about the rain, and then he moved clumsily away into the bush, trampling

huckleberries as he went. Steve went back inside and left them there on the porch together.

"You're a very brave girl," Caroline said, "to keep walking with that bear nearby."

"I'm not afraid," Birch said. "I get that from you."

Caroline hugged her close. They were both wet and cold.

"From me?"

"Who else?" She surveyed the sky. "Dad won't be able to fly in today."

"I think that's safe to say," Caroline whispered. It was late afternoon and the rain would be driving Trevor and Joe back home soon. She thought they would like to have brandy and chocolate prune cake and a warm fire. The evening stretched ahead, delicious and sure, an evening of her own making. She tried not to think of how unfamiliar Will's face would look to her when he returned, of how it would feel to be captive again in his sheltering embrace.

"That bear high-tailed it out of here," Birch said. She shivered.

Caroline posed like a body-builder and said, "Want to feel my muscle?"

Birch laughed and squeezed her bicep.

*Patricia Henley*